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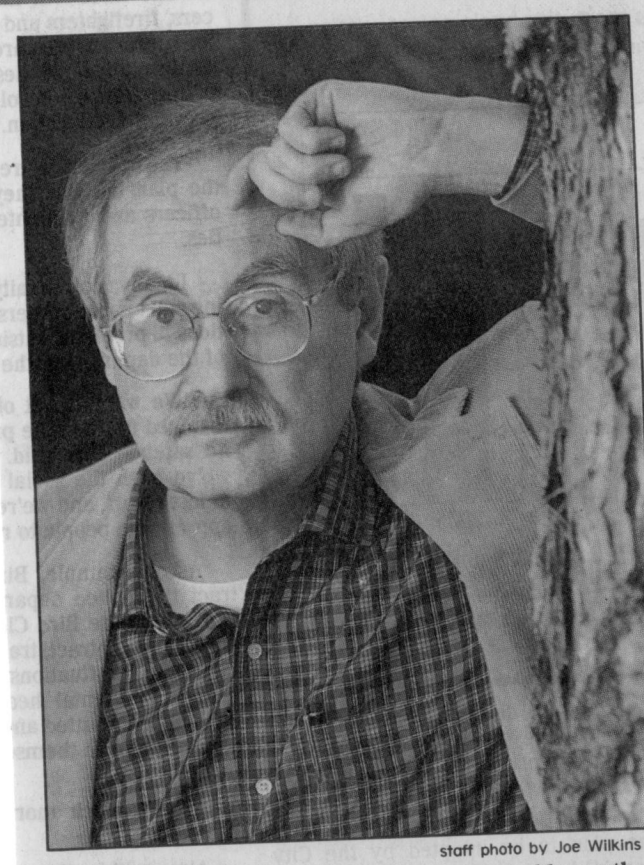

staff photo by Joe Wilkins III

Jerry Franklin is the nation's top expert on old growth.

Researcher preaches new forestry gospel

By LANCE ROBERTSON
The Register-Guard

Jerry Franklin's working yet another skeptical crowd.

On a chilly, foggy day in mid-January, 300 loggers are hunkered down at Eugene's Valley River Inn, listening as Franklin lays out his "new forestry" concepts that have rocked the forestry profession.

Afterward, a small crowd keeps Franklin pinned in a corner for 45 minutes. He patiently answers each question, sometimes with brutal honesty. Erosion from logging roads has ruined a lot of streams and is killing salmon runs, he tells one logger. But Franklin's manner is so disarming that the logger thanks him for being there.

A few weeks earlier, Franklin was giving a similar talk to some environmentalists in Portland. More skeptics. More questions. In the weeks ahead, the nation's foremost authority on old growth forests will visit California, the Rockies, the Southeast, even Cleveland.

He did almost 60 shows like this last year in his dual role as the chief plant ecologist for the U.S. Forest Service and the holder of an endowed chair at the University of Washington.

"He's a high-velocity guy," says friend and colleague Fred Swanson, one of a cadre of Franklinites who pioneered old growth research more than 20 years ago.

"I put guys like him and Jack Ward Thomas (chief author of a spotted owl preservation plan) in the same league," Swanson adds. "The pace they keep and the heat they put up with would be very weary to the rest of us mortals. They seem to draw energy from it."

Like Moses, Franklin is trying to part some troubled waters. His staff is "new forestry," which is based on the notion that instead of just growing trees for lumber and plywood, landowners ought to maintain a forest's ecosystem — that complex, interrelated web of forest life.

New forestry converts believe it is possible to do both, to "share the sandbox," as Franklin puts it.

It is a "kinder, gentler forestry," Franklin says.

The U.S. Forest Service has embraced it and is using it to plan timber sales. Many congressmen wrestling with the Pacific Northwest old growth issue see Franklin's concepts as a way out of the political morass.

But when Franklin looks back over

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his shoulder, he doesn't see a lot of conservationists, loggers or foresters following him to the promised land.

Andy Kerr, conservation director of the Oregon Natural Resources Council, has called new forestry "a kinder, gentler form of rape." New forestry is being used by federal agencies and some politicians "as an excuse to log the last of the old growth forests," he says.

The timber industry fears new forestry just means less federal timber will be available for logging.

"New forestry still doesn't solve the problem of land allocation, of how we're going to split that pie up," says Jim McCauley, forester for the Associated Oregon Loggers in Springfield.

Even some scientists have chimed in.

"A lot of the ideas Jerry puts forward are untested conjecture," says Bob Buckman, a forestry professor at Oregon State University. Although he "admires" Franklin's work, Buckman said he and others "don't have all the pieces in place yet" to justify using new forestry.

Franklin once said he felt "like a long-tail cat in a room full of rockers." But he enjoys the limelight. The science of new forestry has "a certain logic . . . that is very difficult to deny on any kind of rational basis," he says.

Franklin doesn't suggest opening wilderness and other already preserved areas to logging, as conservationists fear. But neither does he want to lock up all remaining old growth, and that has put him at odds with environmentalists.

"We have to preserve a significant amount of old growth," Franklin says. "But not every last stick."

His ideas have spawned a revolution in American forestry because they challenge 40 years of research that support the practice of converting old growth forests to single-species tree farms by clear-cutting the trees, burning slash and replanting seedlings.

Stemming largely from research at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest on the Willamette National Forest near Blue River, new forestry attempts to maintain what Franklin calls "biological legacies" of an old growth forest.

Under new forestry, when land is logged, a large number of live trees, snags and downed logs are left on the site. These "lifeboats," as Franklin calls them, provide nutrients for the new forest and maintain habitat for old growth residents — not just spotted owls but the "creepy crawlies" that live in the roots, soil and decaying logs.

Hacking forests into a crazy-quilt of clear-cuts — the current practice on federal lands — tends to break down the forest's ecosystem, Franklin adds. Nor are giant clear-cuts — the current practice on many private lands — the answer, because they create biological wastelands, he says.

Some private timber companies, such as Plum Creek Land & Timber Co. in Washington state, are experimenting with new forestry. But Franklin says Oregon's timber industry has been reluctant to embrace his precepts.

Franklin says that over time, new forestry could restore many old growth "legacies" on private lands, now virtually stripped of old growth by a century of intense logging.

Franklin's credentials make him well-suited to lead the charge: He is Bloedel professor of ecosystem analysis at the University of Washington, chief plant ecologist for the U.S. Forest Service and a Bullard Fellow at Harvard; and he holds advanced degrees in forestry and botany. He's set to retire from the Forest Service in six months but plans to keep his UW job.

Franklin's disarming manner and his passion for old growth forests enable the graying 54-year-old to preach to the unconverted, Swanson says.

He's like a kindly uncle: conciliatory, not confrontational; homespun and self-effacing.

He says his students at the University of Washington call him "Illinois Jones" when he wears his fedora and leather jacket.

He grew up in Camas, Wash., the son of a Crown-Zellerbach mill foreman. He hunted, fished and hiked in the vast old growth forests standing at the time. At 9, Franklin decided to become a forester. His middle name is Forest.

In 1970, the National Science Foundation funded a study of the world's ecological regions. Franklin and other Forest Service and university scientists at the Andrews forest latched onto the funds.

Until then, most forestry research focused on how to grow trees faster and bigger. No one was looking at what made the ecosystem tick, Franklin says.

Over the years, more than $30 million has gone into old growth research at Andrews, Swanson said. Nearly 1,200 papers on old growth forests have been published.

It might not have turned out that way if Franklin hadn't carried the day back then, Swanson recalls.

Scientists originally argued whether studies should focus on managed second growth stands or old growth.

"Jerry pushed and got us all in the old growth," Swanson said. "I really wonder where we'd be in this regional and national debate if we hadn't pushed into old growth but had studied plantations instead. All this stuff might not have arisen."

Franklin's passion for old growth forests and their intricate workings is almost legendary. He likes to yodel in them, for example.

One story has it that in the 1960s, Franklin was hiking in an old growth forest with Brock Evans, now vice president of the National Audubon Society. "Franklin would stop every few steps and point to a mushroom, a fallen log or a lichen," Evans told American Forests magazine last year. "I would say, 'Look at the size of those trees,' but Franklin would respond, 'Forget the trees. Look at the mushrooms!' "